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## Political Movements of People with Disabilities: The League of the Physically Handicapped, 1935-1938

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From 1935 to 1938 New York City's League of the Physically Handicapped militantly fought disability-based discrimination in public and private employment and in public policies.[1] Its brief history draws attention to some of the major features of 20th-century political movements of people with disabilities.

Most League members had contracted polio as children, wore leg braces, and used crutches or canes. A few had cerebral palsy, tuberculosis, or heart conditions. At least two had lost limbs in accidents. None rode wheelchairs. None was blind or deaf. Some had become friends in New York City's public elementary special-education classes and, after graduating from mainstream high schools, continued to socialize at clubs and recreation centers for disabled people in Manhattan. League activists were immigrants or the children of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe; most were Jewish. Some had been active or had relatives who were active in labor unions or leftist political organizations.

League members asserted that they faced discrimination in private industry. Some businesses required physical examinations unrelated to the tasks of jobs. Florence Haskell recalled that when she applied for a clerical position, "the man told me, 'I'm afraid you'll have to take a physical.'...[Then] he disqualified me....I was very hurt, upset, and mad." Lou Razler, who had cerebral palsy, attended business college for a year and spent five years fruitlessly searching for work. Sylvia Flexer excelled at the Drake Business School, but no business would hire her. "And finally I got a job," she remembered indignantly, "at the Brooklyn Bureau of Charities." Even if they did find jobs, some handicapped people felt they suffered from wage discrimination. Jack Isaacs, who had lost a leg in an industrial accident, had worked as a linotypist, "turn[ing] out just as much work" as the men alongside him, but getting one-third the wages.

Blocked by such barriers in private industry, these and other handicapped young adults expected New Deal work-relief programs to give them jobs just like unemployed nonhandicapped workers. Instead, federal policies categorized them as "unemployable." A group that included Florence Haskell decided to take action. On May 29, 1935, six of them went to New York City's Emergency Relief Bureau and demanded to see the director. Told he was out of town, they refused to leave, though it appears they had not formed any real plan for a protest. Inadvertently attracting press attention the next afternoon, they charged the ERB with discriminating against handicapped persons in assigning relief jobs and demanded fifty jobs for members "of our organization." In fact, there was no formal organization as yet. They were playing the protest by ear. Three of the six continued their "strike" for the next week, supported by both handicapped and nonhandicapped picketers. The ERB sit-in was immediately followed by further demonstrations, repeated arrests, and a trial at which the judge found the militant young handicapped defendants bewildering.

The month of protests and public attention spurred the novice activists to formal organization. Calling themselves "the League of the Physically Handicapped," they collected money at fund-raising parties and labor-union meetings, rented office space, and began to recruit members among their handicapped friends and acquaintances. In November 1935, the League conducted a more effective three-week picket at New York WPA headquarters. Led by Jack Isaacs, they demanded that because of the discrimination in private industry "handicapped people [must] receive a just share of the millions of jobs being given out by the government." Though the protest prodded the local WPA into hiring some forty League members, League leaders believed WPA officials hoped to "kill" the group by hiring "the most active of [us]." But "instead of killing it," recalled Lou Razler, "more handicapped came to the line."

Having developed momentum, the activists were determined to change local and federal policies affecting all physically handicapped job-seekers. By January 1936 they were again picketing New York's WPA. In April they were told that only Washington officials could change policy, so they wrote WPA chief Harry Hopkins on April 23rd and, receiving no reply, again on May 5th. In the second letter they announced their intention to meet him in Washington on May 9th. On Friday, May 8, 1936, thirty-five delegates (fourteen women and twenty-one men) rode all night on a borrowed flatbed truck to the nation's capital. At WPA headquarters they were told Hopkins was away and that WPA concerned itself only with work relief for "employables." Twenty-one year-old League president Sylvia Flexer took a vote and announced to reporters that the delegates would stay "until Mr. Hopkins does see us." League members, she said, were "sick of the humiliation of poor jobs at best [and] often no work at all." They wanted "not sympathy - but a concrete plan to end discrimination... on W.P.A. projects[.]" League spokesman Harry Friedman demanded nationwide WPA quotas for hiring handicapped workers. At last on Monday, May 11th, Hopkins heard their demands for 5,000 WPA jobs in New York City for handicapped workers, "a permanent relief program for the physically handicapped[,] and a Nation-wide census of the physically handicapped" conducted by the League, but funded by the WPA. Hopkins rejected their charges and demands, said he doubted there were 5,000 employable handicapped New Yorkers, and suggested the League come back with proof, "a thesis...show[ing] such discrimination." Then he would "correct those conditions at once."

In August 1936 the League sent to Hopkins and President Franklin Roosevelt and distributed to the press its "Thesis on Conditions of Physically Handicapped," a ten-page memorandum that offered a comprehensive analysis of handicapped persons' "struggle for social and economic security." The Thesis recounted job discrimination in both the private and public sectors and recommended extending preferential civil-service hiring of disabled veterans to handicapped civilians as well. It criticized public and private vocational rehabilitation as underfunded and inadequate, scored New York's state employment agency for placing handicapped workers in "miserably" low-paying temporary jobs and even sending them out "as strike-breakers," and condemned private agencies, such as the Brooklyn Bureau of Charities, for "shameful exploitation." Though home relief was "insufficient" for those who required extra funds for "mechanical appliances and medical care," declared the Thesis, its stringent eligibility requirements denied "vast numbers" even "this mere pittance," reducing them "to vagrancy" and "begging." It also denounced "the whole Emergency Program and all the social legislation of the New Deal" as "consistently neglectful" of the problems of physically handicapped citizens and censured both the indiscriminate classification of handicapped individuals as "unemployable" and the "Substandard Clause" of the National Recovery Act which allowed employers to pay handicapped workers less than the minimum wage (a clause supported by rehabilitation professionals). In conclusion, the "Thesis" repeated the call for WPA to guarantee jobs to "unemployed handicapped" persons, "gather the necessary information upon which to outline a permanent program," and employ handicapped people on that survey.

Perhaps because Hopkins and Roosevelt ignored the Thesis, the League now concentrated its activities in New York City. In September 1936 it and the League for the Advancement of the Deaf secured a promise that New York WPA would set aside for deaf and handicapped workers a minimum of 7% of all future WPA jobs. As a result some 1500 such persons went to work. But in Spring 1937 over 600 lost those jobs during massive nationwide lay-offs. In August 1937 a second League delegation went to Washington and met with Hopkins, but failed to get the lay-offs reversed.

Though the League ultimately failed to redirect federal policies that affected handicapped citizens, it did open up the public sector to some workers with disabilities. Most of the core leadership ultimately pursued civil-service careers. But successful employment and internal political differences and "red baiting" soon led to the League's demise.

The League's significance lies in locating it within the broader political history of disability. Though it did not establish an institutional base for later activism, it did exemplify the features and themes of other political movements of people with disabilities. Like many such groups, the League's ideology and agenda focussed narrowly on people with certain kinds of disabilities. Its office was inaccessible to anyone who could not climb stairs. For its members, who did not ride wheelchairs, the issue was not access, but jobs and personal economic independence. And though at one point it joined forces with the League for the Advancement of the Deaf, there was no continuing alliance with deaf people or with any other group. Other disability-specific political groups - the National Federation of the Blind, the National Association of the Deaf, various activist organizations of "psychiatric survivors" - often followed this pattern of organizing around issues of concern to those with particular disabilities. In contrast, late twentieth-century activism gave rise to cross-disability alliances (e.g. the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities) to

promote universalistic disability-rights legislation such as Section 504, IDEA, and the ADA. These confederated efforts espoused an ecumenical ideology of disability issues and an inclusive definition of disability identity claiming that all people with disabilities confront a common set of cultural prejudices and social hazards and thus should act in political solidarity. By the 1980s, a cross-disability minority-group consciousness had emerged among many younger adults.[2]

If the League did not lead directly to later disability-rights efforts, its analysis, critique, and agenda did foreshadow those campaigns by offering a distinctive disability perspective. While some scholars have said social-welfare policy "excuses" people with disabilities from having to work,[3] the League condemned policies that forced its members out of the job market and onto relief. In its view, the WPA classification of "unemployable" did not charitably exempt them from having to work; it institutionalized job discrimination in law. That categorization would implicitly continue in subsequent policy definitions of disability. In the 1940s the National Federation of the Blind would condemn such policies.[4] In the 1970s and beyond disabled activists would battle what were now called "work disincentives." Thus, several generations of activists held a persistent political perspective that opposed one of the central concepts in social-welfare policy.

League members' distrust of nonhandicapped policymakers and service providers, their demand for a voice in policymaking and program administration, and their use of militant tactics would also reappear in later disability activism. In addition, all such political movements borrowed and adapted the critical analyses of contemporaneous social-change movements. League members drew upon labor and leftist ideologies to explain and oppose the discrimination they faced as handicapped people. In the 1940s NFB President Jacobus ten Broek saw a parallel with and found support from labor unions. Disabled activists in the 1970s were involved with or inspired by the civil-rights, feminist, antiwar, and labor movements.[5]

League activists also anticipated later disability-rights movements by combining issue politics with an implicit identity politics. The press labeled them "cripples" and sometimes "paralytics" or "invalids," terms League members considered stigmatizing. Florence Haskell recalled that when she was a youngster her sister "used to run after kids who called me 'crippled.'" League leaders consistently referred to themselves as "handicapped," using that self-selected label to assert a new identity. Likewise, slogans such as "We Don't Want Tin Cups. We Want Jobs" and "We are Lame But We Can Work" called for more than employment. They rejected society's devaluing verdict and demanded respect. The extensive press coverage of League protests conveyed contradictory stereotypes of pathetic helplessness and dangerous lack of self-control, of communist-manipulated "cripples" who were nonetheless violent and dangerous. In the face of such bias and at a time when President Roosevelt found it necessary to keep his disability hidden, League members engaged in public acts of resistance. "It was a very traumatic experience to even decide to get on a picket line," recalled Sylvia Flexer Bassoff. Florence Haskell explained: "[O]ur people...were self-conscious about their physical disabilities....They didn't like being stared at. They didn't want to be looked at. But after that experience, they decided, 'Let them look,' you know, 'Look back, stare back at them.' ...I think it not only gave us jobs, but it gave us dignity, and a sense of, 'We are people too.'"

The League enabled its members to fashion self-defined positive identities because it became, not just an activist political organization, but a supportive community, one that produced

marriages and families. Other politicized groups have also simultaneously engaged in issue-oriented activism and seen themselves as communities and even "cultures."

The brief career of the League of the Physically Handicapped suggests the need to explore more deeply the history of disability-based political movements. How have their perspectives, agendas, organizations, and activities resembled or differed from one another? Do their analyses and goals point to an underlying implicit core ideology of disability and disability rights that distinguishes their outlooks from those of nondisabled policymakers and professionals? How have they practiced and coordinated issue politics and identity politics? We need comparative historical studies of both disability-specific and cross-disability political organizations in order to determine if we can construct a political history of disability that is general rather than merely group-specific and episodic.

## NOTES

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3. Edward D. Berkowitz, America's Welfare State, From Roosevelt to Reagan, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 98; Edward D. Berkowitz, Disabled Policy: America's Programs for the Handicapped, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 230; Deborah Stone, The Disabled State, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 28. 172-3.

4. Floyd Matson, Walking Alone, Marching Together: A History of the Organized Blind Movement in the United States, 1940-1990, (Washington, D.C.: National Federation of the Blind, 1992) 9-10, 14, 17-23, 27, 32-3, 38-40, 41-2.

5. Matson, Walking Alone and Marching Together, 33-4; Scotch, From Good Will to Civil Rights, 35, 41, 141, 152-3; Shapiro, No Pity, 47; Shaw, Activist Handbook, 239, 246.